

Lawmakers press Portsmouth on landfill group

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PORTSMOUTH - City Attorney Robert Sullivan agreed Monday the Coakley Landfill Group needs to be more transparent as it addresses concerns about the Superfund clean-up site.

“There’s all kinds of swirling questions here which people feel very emotionally and very strongly (about),” Sullivan said during a meeting attended by state lawmakers from Portsmouth. “There are answers to all of those questions.”

Sullivan stressed that members of the Coakley Landfill Group (CLG) “and certainly me as a representative of the city of Portsmouth have the same exact goal in the end as anybody else ...we want to make sure the public health is protected.”

He stated that issues concerning the landfill “should be argued about and discussed and resolved after” debating them openly.

“My frustration is that really hasn’t been happening. What’s been happening is kind of like bombs being sent from one side or the other,” Sullivan said during Monday’s meeting in City Hall.

His comments came after state Rep. Peter Somssich, D-Portsmouth, said that “people are concerned” that “things might be affecting their health and safety with the water.”

“I think it’s important for the Coakley Landfill (group) to demonstrate transparency at this point for the public trust, not because you’re doing anything wrong,” Somssich said.

He believes the CLG needs to take a “more proactive approach to demonstrate transparency instead of resisting (or) what people might see as keeping things to yourself.”

The CLG is made up of municipalities and groups that used the 27-acre landfill in North Hampton and Greenland, along with companies that transported trash there.

The groups and municipalities have been required to pay into a trust created through a 1991 Record of Decision by the Environmental Protection Agency and N.H. Department of Environmental Services. The city of Portsmouth is required to pay 53.6 percent of remediation costs at the landfill, according to the

ROD.

Tests on monitoring wells at the landfill have found PFCs and 1,4-dioxane, both suspected carcinogens, at levels above the EPA's health advisory levels. Many people living near the landfill are worried chemicals leaching from Coakley will contaminate their residential drinking wells, but so far PFCs found in private wells have tested below the EPA's health advisory level.

DES officials, however, have confirmed high levels of PFASs found in nearby Berry's Brook pose a risk to the environment and should be cleaned up

Sullivan was criticized by some, including former Assistant Mayor Jim Splaine, when he testified on Friday in Concord against a bill sponsored by state Rep. Mindi Messmer, D-Rye, and other Seacoast lawmakers, that would make the CLG fall under the provisions of the state's Right to Know Law.

The CLG has also been criticized for hiring a lobbyist to study any legislation that could impact the CLG.

On a bill by bill basis, the CLG's executive committee - which Sullivan serves on - will decide whether the legislation should be "supported, opposed or just left alone."

Sullivan said he spoke against the Right to Know measure on Friday because the group decided "it served no real purpose."

Most documents involving the CLG are already public record, Sullivan said.

State Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, D-Portsmouth, said concerns about the CLG may revolve around the fact there is "not a clear understanding of how that \$27 million was spent."

Sullivan has previously told the Portsmouth Herald that the CLG has spent about \$27 million on remediation at the landfill, \$13 million of which came from Portsmouth taxpayers.

Sullivan pledged to compile a report of how the money was spent, which he said is included in the minutes of meetings the CLG has held for over 30 years.

Money is allocated by the CLG after the Environmental Protection Agency tells the CLG what remediation it wants performed at the site, Sullivan said.

The executive committee then votes to approve the spending, Sullivan said.

"Every penny ... is paid and has been paid," through that process.

City Manager John Bohenko and Mayor Jack Blalock, who attended Monday's meeting, said the City Council would be receiving a report back at their Feb. 5 meeting on the CLG.

Bohenko said the “city will be relying on the city attorney and the consultants they (the CLG) hired to make the presentation. He’s not looking to hide anything.”

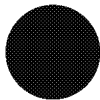
State Rep. Pam Gordon, D-Portsmouth, stated that “as a citizen of Portsmouth as well as a representative,” she believes it’s important to have “differing opinions” about Coakley at the Feb. 5 meeting.

Fuller Clark called on the city to host a “public information meeting,” after the Feb. 5 council meeting so there can be “discussion back and forth between interested parties so they’ll get their questions answered. I know it could be testy but I think it’s an important thing to do.”

State Rep. Tamara Le, D-North Hampton, who represents parts of Portsmouth and North Hampton and Greenland, encouraged city officials to invite officials from those towns to any follow-up meetings.

Bohenko stated if the City Council decides to get more public input on the landfill, “certainly we’ll make sure everyone is invited.”

Sullivan volunteered that he thought having such a “big meeting” was also a good idea.



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